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Continued Use of the DFW rate in annual teaching evaluations of faculty

Submitted by: Greg Brock

1/24/2012

Question:

Why is the DFW rate still being used in the annual evaluation of faculty teaching this year given there is no peer reviewed research evidence of any link between a DFW rate and teaching effectiveness?"

Rationale:

At the Sept. Senate meeting, both the provost and the president made clear that use of the DFW rate was not university policy and, to paraphrase the provost, "all the letters in the alphabet soup" can be used in evaluating classes. Several senators pointed out serious flaws with the DFW rate being linked to teaching effectiveness such as a lack of any peer reviewed literature showing its relevance and the more general issue of why faculty annual teaching evaluations should be linked to student withdrawals.

The general discussion in Sept. also made clear that the use of the DFW was widespread and not just in my college. No one seemed to know who was supporting its use. Only URL links were supplied as a reply to my RFI then, not peer reviewed research. To my surprise I once again received a week ago explicit instructions in completing my annual report for 2011 to explain in the teaching component my "strategies to lower my DFW rate" in my classes. This is particularly bad in my field where a large peer reviewed literature exists on teaching excellence with no mention of the DFW rate in it! If we are a doctoral research university "on the move" to the even higher RUH level, how can we continue to use an index number that has no meaning to evaluate teaching? Who is asking chairs to demand lower DFW rates?

Response:

Minutes: 2/14/2012: A request for Discussion of Continued Use of the DFW Rate in Annual Teaching Evaluations of Faculty: Greg Brock (COBA): The first sentence of the COBA annual self-evaluation asks in the teaching section what strategies the faculty member has to lower the DFW rates in his/her classes. That was explicitly used although we had a discussion in the Senate in September and it was his understanding no one knew where this criterion was coming from, and that the DFW rate was vague. Caren Town mentioned just the W rate. What does that mean, to have a high W rate relative to teaching effectiveness? He pointed out that there is a literature in his field on evaluating teaching, and there's no mention of DFW rate in that literature. So why are we using this DFW rate? It has no meaning whatsoever relative to teaching effectiveness.

Provost Moore wants our Teaching Legacy Task Force to review what role the DFW rate should have in refining our work in education. He went back to what he said earlier, and that is, the full grade distribution does matter. To say that we would no longer look at grade distribution would be a mistake, but noted Brock was asking, "Why DFW only?" He wants to ask our Teaching Legacy Task Force to look into how we should be looking at the grade distribution, what role that should play in evaluating teaching and learning.

Jill Lockwood (COBA) noted that she is a strong supporter of accountability and DFW's, but thinks it has no place in year-to-year teaching evaluations. She has no plan to increase or decrease the DFW rate, but rather plans to treat her class each time afresh, look at her student evaluations and add things that she thinks need to be added and stop things that need to be stopped. Maybe a five-year DFW look back would be appropriate, but not annual.

Mikelle Calhoun (COBA) Noted this is her fourth university, but the first where this issue has come up. She does not disagree with the need to look at whether some people give all A's and some people give all C's, but thinks that perhaps some comparison information might be useful. Also, three quarters of her classes are online and we need to consider a different standard with online; first-time online students might be shocked to realize they have to teach themselves. And so they are probably a little bit more likely to withdraw, maybe a bit more likely to fail or have significant problems.

Marc Cyr (CLASS) asked if this is going to be sent to the Teaching Legacy group, could the Provost direct people not to consider DFW rates in evaluations of this kind until that group has reported.

Provost Moore said he would take that under consideration.

Tony Barilla (COBA) asked the Provost also to take under consideration that our enrollment maximization model is counter intuitive to the lowering of DFW's.

President Keel offered a counter consideration which has to do with the concept of Retention, Progression, and Graduation, which is getting more attention nationwide, "and DFW rates fits into that intimately. . . . This is coming from . . . The White House, and the Governor's Office, and the Chancellor's Office and the Board of Regents' Office, and the Provost and I have been warning [faculty] about this, and I know you're probably tired of hearing it, but it is going to only get more prominent as we move forward because not only are we all going to be held accountable for Retention, Progression, and Graduation rates, and completion rates . . . But our formula funding is going to be dependent upon meeting the goals that are going to be prescribed to us. So it is only going to get more significant this issue of accountability, and that is going to by definition have to go to the teaching, right into the classroom, become an intimate part of what you do. So . . . You have to ask yourself, why do I care about DFW rates? And I think we also have to flip that around and say we should be deeply concerned about DFW rates because there should be no reason for a student to fail. Now I know that's a stupid thing to say, but if we have a class that typically is failing a large number of students, then it's incumbent upon us all to find out why and to implement strategies to try and correct that whether it's changing the way we enroll, whether it's changing the Professors that are teaching the course , whether it's changing the curriculum, whether it's changing evaluations, or whether it is putting in more tutors, or whether we use computerization . . . We are going to be required to implement policies, procedures and pathways for students to be successful. And there is no way out of it.

Moderator Krug asked VP Thompson, if we have more students staying on, and they are better students, why should we have a problem with D's and F's?

VP Thompson was not sure: "What I do know is that our retention rate is higher in the last five or six years. That goes back to having a higher ability student."

With time pressing, Moderator Krug asked for a motion to continue to 6:15. It was so moved and approved.

SGA VP Christina Belge asked for an evaluative system so that when a student goes to drop or withdraw from a class, there is some kind of question we ask them to find the reason behind it, so we're getting data. If we're going to use DFW's to help teaching, this data is needed.

Robert Costomiris (CLASS) said, ". . . We, we all know that this is coming down from on high, but you have to, I don't think you can avoid taking into account what, what Professor Barilla has said and these classes are getting larger and larger, and the impact is clear. I can look at the grade book and see what's going on. I also think we all hear about accountability, accountability but I want to hear at least once something about student accountability. They are responsible for what they do in class. And if they don't do the work, they can't pass the class, and I refuse to change my class to allow students to get through who have not done the work. It just gets down to that, or the whole thing is a sham."

Tim Teeter (CLASS) opined that he would be hard-pressed to find a student who would admit that social life got in the way. It would be great if you could get them all to be honest, but he had a feeling that would not happen. Also, we're handed students who can't read and then we're told to get them to graduate. There is an inherent tension in having students who are not willing to do the work or are not willing to be prepared, and then told somehow we have to fix this.